

February 9, 2023

Gilles Stucker
Director, Strategic Initiatives
Office of the Deputy Mayor for Planning and Economic Development
1350 Pennsylvania Avenue, NW
Suite 317
Washington, DC 20004

Dear Mr. Stucker:

This letter responds to the request for comments from the Deputy Mayor for Planning and Economic Development (DMPED) regarding the future of the Chevy Chase Civic Core, the site on Connecticut Avenue just south of Chevy Chase Circle.

The Washington Interfaith Network (WIN) is a multi-faith, multi-racial network of 45 institutions across the District, primarily houses of worship. The WIN Ward 3/Upper NW Congregations Affordable Housing Work Group, led by WIN member institutions Adas Israel, Chevy Chase Presbyterian Church, National United Methodist Church, St. Columba's Episcopal Church, and Temple Sinai, is specifically focused on how to bring affordable housing to Ward 3 and other areas of Upper Northwest. These five institutions comprise approximately 4,800 households, many of them located near the Civic Core site. In addition, our work group includes congregants of other Ward 3 and 4 institutions as well as those who live in Ward 3 and 4 but worship elsewhere in the city.

Our comments focus on both the goals for the Civic Core site and our concerns about the process for decision making about its future. In short, we have asked the District to work with community stakeholders to:

- create at least 100 new homes at the site;
- build mixed income housing that ranges between 30 percent of median family income (MFI) and 80 percent MFI;
- jointly and expeditiously develop a request for proposals (RFP) for the library, community center, and housing components; and
- build on the work done by the community and the Office of Planning on the Chevy Chase Small Area Plan.

We also have concerns about the process DMPED will use going forward. A successful process will:

- solicit broad community input in advance of the issuance of an RFP and any decision on surplus; and
- use a competitive RFP process to ensure the best value for the project; and

- set clear expectations in the RFP to ensure that the District and the winning bidder will be held accountable for delivering on project goals.

Below we elaborate on each of these points.

Goals for the Chevy Chase Civic Core

In October of last year, WIN, along with the Coalition for Smarter Growth and Ward3Vision, issued a statement of goals for the Chevy Chase Civic Core, summarized as follows (see full statement attached):

Affordable housing should be part of this site redevelopment.

- The Civic Core site presents a singular opportunity to make a significant statement that our community is serious about breaking from an exclusionary past, and that we wish to be welcoming and inclusive.
- Given that the District owns the site, the Civic Core provides a stronger lever for affordability than other projects that may be developed as a matter of right or under the planned unit development (PUD) process. This is because the land itself does not have to be purchased from a private owner, development costs are lower, and at a minimum, public lands used for residences must include at least 30 percent affordable housing.
- In 2020, after considerable public discussion about changes to the Comprehensive Plan, Advisory Neighborhood Commission (ANC) 3/4G asked the District to complete a Small Area Plan for the Chevy Chase “Gateway,” (now referred to as the Civic Core), to be developed through a collaborative public process that included opportunities for community input. The result of that effort included the recommendation to develop this site with a new and improved community center and library, with the addition of affordable housing. The Housing Work Group of the ANC’s Racism Task Force reiterated support for building affordable housing here.
- Affordable units at this site should remain affordable in perpetuity.
- Some have suggested that this site should not be developed for affordable housing because other sites, such as those in Friendship Heights, are preferable. But we will have to look at all Ward 3 possibilities - on public and private land - in order to meet the goal of creating 1,990 affordable units in Rock Creek West by 2025. While we are more than halfway to 2025, DMPED reports indicate that Ward 3 is just 3.6 percent of the way toward this goal. Moreover, among various sites being considered for redevelopment, the Chevy Chase Civic Core is the closest to being ready.

One hundred homes is a reasonable goal within a scale that is appropriate for the neighborhood.

- While the exact number of units will depend upon their size and mix (e.g. one bedroom, two or more bedrooms), we believe that the site can accommodate a significant number of households in a manner that is consistent with and enhances the character of the neighborhood.
- We anticipate that experts in planning and design can provide exciting alternative visions for how to configure the space so it meets this goal as well as others important to our community (e.g., green spaces, outdoor recreation, parking, welcoming facades).
- We also see opportunities for potentially incorporating parts of adjacent underused properties to accomplish this goal.

We want a mix of affordability that ranges between 30 percent of median family income (MFI) and 80 percent MFI.

- This would provide homes for those most in need of affordable housing—a demographic that is particularly in need of affordable options in Chevy Chase and across the city— as well as for teachers, first responders, retail workers, and library and community center employees who are an important part of our community.
- This mix is consistent with recommendation 4.2 of the Small Area Plan that development of this site should “encourage a range of household sizes and serve a range of incomes, with priority for units for households at or below 40 percent of the median family income.”
- The exact mix will depend on subsidy sources available and costs. Sources include the Housing Production Trust Fund, project-based Local Rent Supplement Program (LRSP), Low Income Housing Tax Credit (with income averaging), and tax-exempt bonds.

Process and Timelines

DMPED should take steps to be more transparent about the process for decision making and development. As outlined below, these steps would lead to a more productive community discussion and foster accountability.

DMPED should promptly outline steps in the process including timelines.

- Having a more transparent process would reassure community members about what the different steps are and when they will have opportunities for input.
- DMPED can play a key role in ensuring that discussions between the city and the community are fact-based, productive, and respectful.

There must be ample and authentic opportunities for community input and voice regarding site development prior to a surplussing decision.

- DMPED can use multiple tools to solicit community input including surveys and charette-style sessions that allow residents to share ideas, make suggestions, and identify specific concerns. Such opportunities should be undertaken expeditiously to inform any RFP and be done in advance of a decision on surplussing.
- Such tools would facilitate productive engagement and participation of the entire Chevy Chase community.

The library and community center program, planning, and construction budgets must be developed and finalized expeditiously so they can be part of a single RFP for the entire site, including the mixed-income housing component.

- There are likely to be economies of scale and scope if the new library and community center are designed together (e.g., common entry space, bathrooms, mechanical systems) as well as administrative efficiencies.

A competitive RFP will provide the best opportunity to get creative and workable solutions for the site, but it must be designed so that bidders respond to community needs and can be held accountable for outcomes.

- A competitive process will allow the community to consider alternative approaches from several experienced teams and ensure efficient use of limited public assets.
- People are raising concerns about whether private entities charged with development will follow through on their commitments, pointing to previous projects that have failed to deliver.
- We can use what we have learned from prior projects to ensure stronger accountability going forward. The RFP and subsequent actions to award the project should include clear expectations and mechanisms to ensure compliance. For example, the RFP should require bidders to show a strong track record in building affordable housing.

We appreciate the opportunity to share our views, and we look forward to continued engagement in the weeks and months ahead.

Sincerely,

Jamie Butler, Adas Israel, co-chair

Barbara Kraft, Temple Sinai, co-chair

Ann Michel, National United Methodist Church

Susan Price, Chevy Chase Presbyterian Church

Anne Schwartz, Temple Sinai

Elizabeth Vaden, St. Columba's Episcopal Church

Attachment